

Aunty Misery

Retold by Judith Ortiz Cofer

This is a story about an old, very old woman who lived alone in her little hut with no other company than a beautiful pear tree that grew at her door. She spent all her time taking care of her pear tree. But the neighborhood children drove the old woman crazy by stealing her fruit. They would climb her tree, shake its delicate limbs, and run away with armloads of golden pears, yelling insults at “Aunty Misery,” as they called her.

One day, a pilgrim stopped at the old woman’s hut and asked her permission to spend the night under her roof. Aunty Misery saw that he had an honest face and bade the traveler come in. She fed him and made a bed for him in front of her hearth. In the morning while he was getting ready to leave, the stranger told her that he would show his gratitude for her **hospitality** by granting her one wish.

“There is only one thing that I desire,” said Aunty Misery.

“Ask, and it shall be yours,” replied the stranger, who was a sorcerer in disguise.

“I wish that anyone who climbs up my pear tree should not be able to come back down until I permit it.”

“Your wish is granted,” said the stranger, touching the pear tree as he left Aunty Misery’s house.

And so it happened that when the children came back to **taunt** the old woman and to steal her fruit, she stood at her window watching them. Several of them shimmied up the trunk of the pear tree and immediately got stuck to it as if with glue. She let them cry and beg her for a long time before she gave the tree permission to let them go, on the condition that they never again steal her fruit or bother her.

Time passed and both Aunty Misery and her tree grew bent and gnarled with age. One day another traveler stopped at her door. This one looked suffocated and exhausted, so the old woman asked him what he wanted in her village. He answered her in a voice that was dry and hoarse, as if he had swallowed a desert: “I am Death, and I have come to take you with me.”

Thinking fast, Aunty Misery said, “All right, but before I go I would like to pluck some pears from my beloved pear tree to remember how much pleasure it brought me in this life. But, I am a very old woman and cannot climb to the tallest branches where the best fruit is; will you be so kind as to do it for me?”

With a heavy sigh like wind through a catacomb, Death climbed the pear tree. Immediately he became stuck to it as if with glue. And no matter how much he cursed and threatened, Aunty Misery would not give the tree permission to release Death.

Many years passed and there were no deaths in the world. The people who made their living from death began to protest loudly. The doctors claimed no one bothered to come in for examinations or treatments anymore, because they did not fear dying; the pharmacists’ business suffered too because medicines are, like magic potions, bought to prevent or postpone the **inevitable**; the priests and undertakers were unhappy with the situation also, for obvious reasons. There were also many old folks tired of life who wanted to pass on to the next world to rest from the miseries of this one.

Aunty Misery realized all this, and not wishing to be unfair, she made a deal with her prisoner, Death: if he promised not ever to come for her again, she would give him his freedom. He agreed. And that is why so long as the world is the world, Aunty Misery will always live.

The Myth of Midas

Midas was a king of Phrygia, a region nowadays part of Turkey. One day some of his farmhands brought him a satyr they had caught napping in the vineyard. This creature, part man, part goat, still groggy and much the worse for wear, had been thoroughly trussed up to keep him from escaping. Midas immediately recognized Silenus, right-hand satyr to the god Dionysus, and ordered him set free.

Silenus explained that he and his master had just returned from the East where they had been engaged in spreading the cultivation of the grape. Dionysus had brought back a tiger or two, an ever-expanding flock of followers and one very drunken satyr. Silenus had conked out in Midas's vineyard to sleep it off. Now he was grateful to the king for treating him with dignity, and so was Dionysus. The god was so pleased, in fact, that he offered to grant whatever Midas should wish for.

Now, you didn't get to rule a kingdom in those days without a pretty active grasp of what makes for a successful economy. Midas didn't have to think twice. As the simplest plan for the constant replenishment of the royal treasury, he asked that everything he touch be turned to gold. Arching a godly eyebrow, Dionysus went so far as to ask if Midas were sure. To which the king instantly replied, "Sure I'm sure." So Dionysus waved his pinebranch scepter and conferred the boon.

And Midas rushed back home to try it out. Tentatively at first, he laid a trembling fingertip upon a bowl of fruit and then a stool and then a wooly lambkin. And when each of these had been transmuted in a trice into purest gold, the king began to caper about like the lambkin before its transformation.

"Just look at this!" he crowed, turning his chariot into a glittering mass of priceless-thought-worthless transportation. "Look what daddy can do!" he cried, taking his young daughter by the hand to lead her into the garden for a lesson in making dewy nature gleam with a monotonous but more valuable sheen. Encountering unexpected resistance, he swung about to see why his daughter was being such a slug. Whereupon his eyes encountered, where late his child had been, a life-size golden statue that might have been entitled "Innocence Surprised".

"Uh oh," said Midas, and from that point on the uh-oh's multiplied. He couldn't touch any useful object without it losing in utility what it gained in monetary value, nor any food without it shedding all nutritional potency on its leaden way down his gullet.

In short, Midas came to understand why Dionysus had looked askance when asked to grant the favor. He went back to Dionysus and begged him to remove the magic touch. Fortunately, the god was a good sport about it. He allowed Midas to wash away his magic touch in the river Pactolus, which ever after enjoyed renown for its shimmering deposits of gold.